

**Heart of Stone**

by L.B. Sisk

(Short Story c. 1992. Now the Intro of the coming novel: *Shears  
Trades Swords*)

"But I don't want to be a school master," a little girl, about the age of Amber, cried beside her mother. "I wanted to make quilts and blankets for horses."

Amber glanced away from the woman and daughter for a moment, looked up at her own mother, who was talking to another woman behind them, and then peeped toward the front of the line they were in. Even today, practically everyone in the surrounding three sectors waited to discover the future of their

children, knowing that this line, the one directed towards the Oracle of Prophecy, would lead them to a ...

Amber sighed while her mother, Laris Tabiare, kept a strong hand on her own. They'd been waiting here for an hour? two?

*Does it matter?* She yawned and looked back at the girl and mother who walked away from the Oracle's temple.

The daughter was crying now and the woman only nudged her along holding her shoulders. "I know, Honey, but don't bother yourself with *that* now. This is your destiny."

Amber watched the two walk down the path until she lost them down the hillside into the valley below. The mother seemed happy.

*Huh?* She shook her head, mimicking something her father did on occasion, and then tested if she still had any feeling in one set of her fingers by wiggling them. She yawned again and kept from fidgeting. She could do nothing else except to look around her. Her mom continued to maintain the motherly grip on her hand, but Amber--since she had been here--had often stretched out as far away as she could to see things beyond those people immediately around her.

*By the Goddesses!* Her eyes widened again. Thousands of people were either in line or were walking home, and she noticed the sun had completed half of its journey, causing odd black

balls to either rest or glide over the landscape beneath everyone's feet.

How long was the line? She couldn't tell, especially after a lock of red hair was blown over her face. There was a wind out, a summer breeze, keeping Amber cool in her sundress, but she felt uncomfortable here and didn't like it.

*Ominous? Foreboding?* She stumbled with the description of how she felt. But, even though she couldn't really describe it, she shivered by the sight and energy of the place around her. Truly, the trees and obelisks around them seemed to vibrate with the Oracle's energy--naturally being a part of the perpetual essence people associated with the Prophecy.

Up ahead and *there*, atop the high plateau so many had journeyed here today, the Oracle itself--herself, well, one in the same--rested in her home. Really, it was a huge, half-buried arena, which was surrounded by an assembly of columns in a dark pit. Legends told of how an ancient crater had been carved out of the hard stone of this great mountain during the time of the Gods ... here on the place, this very spot, of Lafter's last breath.

She actually knew little about the Gods themselves, and Amber had never understood what the priests and her parents had said about them. She only cared to remember enough to know that

the late deity Lafter had had something to do with this line of people she was currently in. And had to do with--

"But ... but I wanted to be a soldier," a little voice whined.

She raised an eyebrow, briefly looking toward her village at the hill's base near the large river of Martov, and spied a boy who was stomping his feet and making a fuss. His mother could only purse her lips ... Would Amber's mother call this shame?

The woman smiled and tried to wipe the boy's tears away. "Don't worry, dear." The mother forced the youngster to blow his nose. "Blacksmiths do well."

"No! No! No!" the boy cried and pouted and stomped his feet again as if he were trying to hurt his shadow, doing damage only to himself.

*Silly boy.* Amber smiled, knowing she would never do such a thing. Her mother and neighborhood women had often said, "That little girl's very, *VERY* bright for her age."

Of course, Amber didn't really understand what *that* meant, even though she had a good idea that they were talking about *her*. Still, adults made little sense, but as long as she was treated better than the boys next door because of it she didn't really care.

Another girl, two in front of Amber, nudged her mother's knee. "Mommy, what is this for?"

"I told you already, Katis," Amber noticed an odd-shaped smile on the woman's lips, resembling those she had seen on her own mother's when she'd done something wrong. Yet the girl held on to her quizzical look, and the woman eventually gave in:

"It's about your chosen path. What you're going to be when you grow up."

"Huh?" the little girl piped.

Amber remembered how her mother and father had commented about how some people brought their children too early ...

"It's something for us, Katis, your father and me," the woman said in a soft voice, brushing the girl's cheek with a gentle hand. "So we can help you."

The girl only smiled, the matter settled.

*What the shit?* Amber gripped more tightly on her mother's hand. She still heard her mom's voice, still talking to the woman behind them, and tried, at first, to follow the conversation. However, Amber soon lost interest, since adults always seemed to talk in riddles about the important stuff.

*Sure.* She looked up into the sky, noticing a great puffy cloud shaped like a donkey. *They can spend hours telling us about the personalities of our stuffed toys, but the future ...*

She noticed another girl in tears, her father, the mother not here, doing his best to comfort her. Amber thought about her own father, wishing that he could have been here too. But the leather shop--his work--had kept him from this visit to the Oracle. She thought about him while the sad girl's father attempted to dry his daughter's tears. She couldn't hear what they were saying, but she knew it was about the Prophecy.

*What had that girl wished to be?* Amber closed her eyes, but she dared not to dream.

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"Come in, darling." Wrinkled fingers motioned Amber their way. The girl--surrounded by an ancient marble doorway--had walked down a hundred granite steps. At the center of the large pit was a marble building. And, once she had peaked in, a soft, flute-like voice had greeted her.

"Don't be afraid," a soft chuckle filled the room as the old woman gestured toward her again. "I won't harm you."

Amber hesitated. As all the children before her, she had left her mother at the entrance of the Oracle's basilica and had walked down the steps into the deep, dark basin alone. The ceiling above the entrance had been nothing more than black marble. However, eventually, as the girl made her way down, she had noticed clouds in a night sky, which had been a stark

contrast to the soft glow of crystals that had guided her down the steps.

*But it's midmorning! Fu ... How can such magic exist?* she had asked--nearly letting loose a curse her dad often said--but the need for an answer faded once the Oracle had welcomed her into the main chamber.

The girl looked around timidly, not really seeing anything in the room besides the Priestess, the Oracle--both, right?--who would soon interpret the power of the Prophecy from the Great Stone, the Heart of Lafter.

"Little Amber," the Priestess said, somehow knowing her name--

*But she is the Great One,* Amber reminded herself, and also found that her legs remained still.

The old woman smiled. In the soft torchlight, straight teeth shined white, brighter and better in shape than those of even younger women Amber had seen. In a gentle way, the Wise One reached out again. "Come here. Do not fear me, nor your future."

Amber wasn't scared. The old woman, despite the perfect teeth and upright posture, looked much like her grandmother, and she had been told the Priestess could never harm her. So, trust was not the issue, nor the future ... just *r-e-l-u-c-t-e-n-c-e?*

"I'm not sure." She shrugged her shoulders, and looked around the room, trying to avoid the gaze of the Oracle.

However, Amber soon let her eyes fall on the great stone itself, which rested in the middle of the woman's chamber. The God's Heart hummed quietly and emitted a beautiful, alternating green and violet glow from its crystalline sides. It held her eyes for a moment until her ears vibrated from the chuckle of the Priestess.

"What is this?" Smiling, the woman stepped near Amber's side. "You doubt the power of the Prophecy?"

"No, I--"

"Or have you already become overwhelmed by its power?"

"What?" Amber shook her head, raising an eyebrow, something her father often did in such situations ... But she believed she understood. Maybe it had been by the way the Priestess held her hands outward, or by the smile blended with old but nurturing cheeks? "Well ... umm ... can the Future be changed?"

"What did you say?" The old woman drew back, but the grin had remained. "An unusual question for such youth ... such ... such youth." Then more softly: "But impossible for the elder." The Great One walked near Amber and laid a hand on her shoulder. "For some reason I knew ... you'd ask me this. Few have ... far

too few ... But, nevertheless, I can only say that the Fates spin many threads and I do my best to read them. Come now."

Amber only nodded, allowing the Priestess to bring her to the glowing orb, the stone about the size of a large man's fist. It sparkled even more brightly after they drew--

She blinked, believing she saw images, people--thousands upon thousands upon thousands of lives in the structure. And she looked up into the green eyes of the woman ... The Great One had been staring at the orb too but looked at the girl now--*Shocked?*

The woman opened her mouth--

"No!" Amber turned and looked away from the woman and the stone, noticing paintings of religious leaders hanging on the walls. But she kept herself from asking about them, thinking instead about the future, about the things the children before her had said. Then she stressed importance about *this* visit from her parents ... "I don't ... I don't want you to tell me."

She closed her eyes, covered her ears; but still heard a quick breath beside her. Then another chuckle.

"You are truly an unusually *gifted* child, dear Amber." The old woman had touched her cheek, wiping away a tear the girl hadn't known was there. "I've never withheld a Prophecy, and I've done this far longer than your years. After all, *this* ..." She gestured with her hands. "*This* was my Destiny."

The Priestess sighed and crouched down on her heels, eye to eye with Amber, trying to say something ...

"Wh ... what had you wished to be?" Amber asked.

The woman, a tear in her eye, stared into space and then back into Amber's gaze.

"I ... I have forgotten." The Priestess rose up, stood, soon resting her hands on the great stone pillar holding Lafter's heart. Amber could only see the back of the woman's head. Long white--

"Go, child," the Priestess finally croaked out after some short breaths ... sobbing. "Leave me. Be one whose life is free. Grab whatever thread you wish."

The girl began to flee, wishing to leave this place. But she stopped, thinking of what the woman said, the way she had said it ... had spoken ... her tone.

Standing at the entrance, the exit, Amber then turned and stared, moments passing, looking at the woman who often interpreted Fate. The Future. The Priestess was crouched over the pillar now. Was she crying?

"Great One?"

"It's all right, child--"

"No," Amber interrupted despite her age. "Thank you."

"Oh, no, child," the woman turned, shook her head, green eyes holding many tears. "Honestly, thank you."

Not understanding what the woman meant by that, Amber could only smile, turn and walk away.

"Amber?" She stopped and looked back at the Priestess. Amber was crying too. This all seemed so sad, but ...

"Child, you ... you will understand," the woman seemed to smirk. "You will understand in time."

Still confused, Amber nodded, said nothing else and left the woman in the Oracle's Hall. For a time, slowly walking up the steps, she thought about what the woman had said ...

But soon began to wonder about *other* things.

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"One thirty." Her eyes rested momentarily on the Great Sundial, before Laris looked at the Oracle's temple. She had ended her conversation with the woman behind her over an hour ago, and it had led to awkward, dreadful small talk.

*Where's Amber? What's taking so long?* Laris had discovered her own destiny in only a few minutes, but an hour? People were actually starting to grumble at the entrance and kept looking her way ...

*It had taken much longer to dry my tears though,* Laris admitted to herself. *But I had been home by--*

"Amber?" A tiny figure appeared and she ran to the entrance, now doubling as an exit from the Oracle's house.

"Amber?" Something was wrong. *What is it?*

"Mom." Her daughter ... smiled and reached for Laris' hand.

*Oh, no.* Laris shuddered. *Has she accepted the truth already?* Would she be unable to comfort Amber like her own mother had done long before?

So long, so long ago, Laris had dreamed that she'd train horses for the annual Governor's festival--only to become the maker of rugs and sweaters and such. And, naturally, her true Fate and devastated her ... yet her mother had been there to ease her sorrow. But had Amber sat down by herself to come to grips with her destiny alone?

Truly, the girl was more mature than her age could tell, and Laris was proud of her daughter, despite the missed opportunity to nurture Amber one last time as a child, before the preparations were made for the girl's future.

"So what did *she* say?" Laris bent over and petted the dark-red curls on Amber's head. And fought down the tears that wanted to come from her own eyes.

"Sh ... she," Amber stuttered and threw a quick glance behind her. Then shuddered.

The woman took a breath. Would she be able to comfort her daughter after all--

"She ... she said I'm to be a trader to the cities and countries in the North."

"What?" Laris thought she had dropped to her knees, but she realized she was still on her feet. "But you'll have to master hundreds of skills like economics, combat, writing, elf and dragon lore, to name just a few ..." And then her heart raced with realization: "And horseback riding, along with the training of all sorts of them."

"I know." Her daughter looked with her bright, violet eyes up into Laris' own of amber. "Will you and Daddy be able to help me, and the others in the village, to teach me ... maybe have the other children help me train too?"

Laris threw a quick glance toward the Oracle's resting place, then the village, the clouds above, the mountains in the distance, and then she let her eyes fall back to her daughter.

She took a breath, a deep one after seeing the compulsion already soaked well into and throughout her child's face ...

Laris' own village had never had a trader and knew little of the places far off. What she had heard of them, had come from those roving merchants of other areas and lands. But Amber? Her little girl a trader?

*My baby ...* "We ... we will do our best." Laris guided her daughter down the steps of the Oracle's mountainside, down to the village far below, which rested near the great river, Martov-Landiner. The very river that led to the cities Amber had mentioned.

Saying little else, she just held her daughter's hand as they walked, and looked at the horizon while wondering how far her daughter would travel beyond the farthest point ... the most distant peak.

Wiping tears away from her eyes, Laris smiled, soon started swinging their arms in the air, and practically sung the rest of the response to her daughter's question: "After all, we have to. It's your destiny, Amber, *your* Destiny ..."